



By E. AND H. HERON.

No. II.—THE STORY OF MEDHANS LEA.*

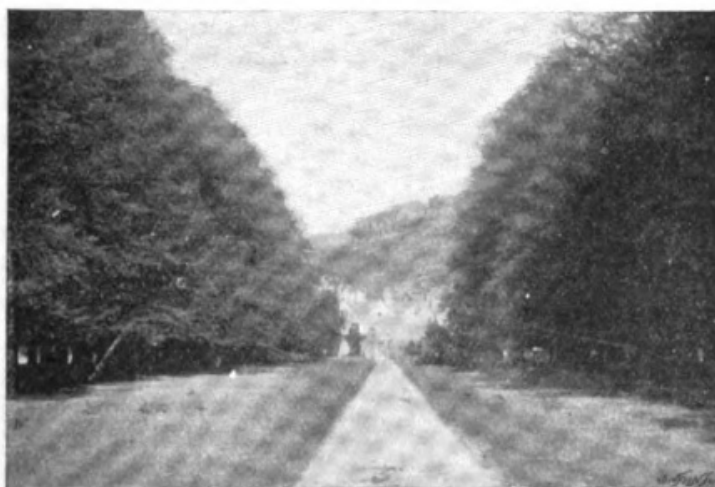
THE following story has been put together from the account of the affair given by Nare-Jones, sometime house-surgeon at Bart's, of his strange terror and experiences both in Medhans Lea and the pallid avenue between the beeches; of the narrative of Savelsan, of what he saw and heard in the billiard room and afterwards; of the silent and indisputable witness of big, bullnecked Harland himself; and, lastly, of the conversation which subsequently took place between these three men and Mr. Flaxman Low, the noted psychologist.

It was by the merest chance that Harland and his two guests spent that memorable evening of the 18th of January, 1889, in the house of Medhans Lea. The house stands on the slope of a partially wooded ridge in one of the Midland Counties. It faces south, and overlooks a wide valley bounded by the blue outlines of the Bredon hills. The place is secluded, the nearest dwelling being a small public-house at the cross roads some mile and a half from the lodge gates.

Medhans Lea is famous for its long straight avenue of beeches, and for other things. Harland, when he signed the lease, was thinking of the avenue of beeches; not of the other things, of which he knew nothing until later.

Harland had made his money by running tea plantations in Assam, and he owned all the virtues and faults of a man who has spent most of his life abroad. The first time he visited the house he weighed seventeen stone and ended most of his sentences with "don't yer know?" His ideas could hardly be said to travel on the higher planes of thought, and his chief aim in life was to keep himself down to the seventeen stone. He had a red neck and a blue eye, and was a muscular, inoffensive, good-natured man, with courage to spare, and an excellent voice for accompanying the banjo.

After signing the lease, he found that Medhans Lea needed an immense amount of putting in order and decorating. While this was being



Medhans Lea.

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done, he came backwards and forwards to the nearest provincial town, where he stopped at a hotel, driving out almost daily to superintend the arrangements of his new habitation. Thus he had been away for the Christmas and New Year, but about the 15th January he returned to the Red Lion, accompanied by his friends Nare-Jones and Savelsan, who proposed to move with him into his new house during the course of the ensuing week.

The immediate cause of their visit to Medhans Lea on the evening of the 18th inst. was the fact that the billiard table at the Red Lion was not fit, as Harland remarked, to play shinty on, while there was an excellent table just put in at Medhans Lea, where the big billiard-room in the left wing had a wide window with a view down a portion of the beech avenue.

"Hang it!" said Harland, "I wish they would hurry up with the house. The painters aren't out of it yet, and the people don't come to the Lodge till Monday."

"It's a pity, too," remarked Savelsan regretfully, "when you think of that table."

Savelsan was an enthusiast in billiards, who spent all the time he could spare from his business, which happened to be tea-broking, at the game. He was the more sorry for the delay, since Harland was one of the few men he knew to whom it was not necessary to give points.

"It's a ripping table," returned Harland. "Tell you what," he added, struck by a happy idea, "I'll send out Thoms to make things straight for us to-morrow, and we'll put a case of syphons and a bottle of whisky under the seat of the trap, and drive over for a game after dinner."

The other two agreed to this arrangement, but in the morning Nare-Jones found himself obliged to run up to London to see about securing a berth as ship's doctor. It was settled, however, that on his return he was to follow Harland and Savelsan to Medhans Lea.

He got back by the 8.30, entirely delighted, because he had booked a steamer bound for the Persian Gulf and Karachi, and had gained the cheering intelligence that a virulent type of cholera was lying in wait for the advent of the Mecca pilgrims in at any rate

two of the chief ports of call, which would give him precisely the experience he desired.

Having dined, and the night being fine, he ordered a dogcart to take him out to Medhans Lea. The moon had just risen by the time he reached the entrance to the avenue, and as he was beginning to feel cold he pulled up, intending to walk to the house. Then he dismissed the boy and cart, a carriage having been ordered to come for the whole party after midnight. Nare-Jones stopped to light a cigar before entering the avenue, then he walked past the empty lodge. He moved briskly in the best possible temper with himself and all the world. The night was still, and his collar up, his feet fell silently on the dry carriage road, while his mind was away on blue water forecasting his voyage on the s.s. *Sumatra*.

He says he was quite halfway up the avenue before he became conscious of anything unusual. Looking up at the sky, he noticed what a bright, clear night it was, and how well defined the outline of the beeches stood out against the vault of heaven. The moon was yet low, and threw netted shadows of bare twigs and branches on the road which ran between black lines of trees in an almost straight vista up to the dead grey face of the house now barely two hundred yards away. Altogether it struck him as forming a pallid picture, etched in like a steel engraving in black, and grey, and white.

He was thinking of this when he was aware of words spoken rapidly in his ear, and he turned half expecting to see someone behind him. No one was visible. He had not caught the words, nor could he define the voice; but a vague conviction of some horrible meaning fixed itself in his consciousness.

The night was very still, ahead of him the house glimmered grey and shuttered in the moonlight. He shook himself, and walked on oppressed by a novel sensation compounded of disgust and childish fear; and still, from behind his shoulder, came the evil, voiceless murmuring.

He admits that he passed the end of the avenue at an amble, and was abreast of a semi-circle of shrubbery, when a small object

was thrust out from the shadow of the bushes, and lay in the open light. Though the night was peculiarly still, it fluttered and balanced a moment, as if windblown, then came in skimming flights to his feet. He picked it up and made for the door, which yielded to his hand, and he flung it to and bolted it behind him.

Once in the warmly-lit hall his senses returned, and he waited to recover breath and composure before facing the two men whose voices and laughter came from a room on his right. But the door of the room was thrown open, and the burly figure of Harland in his shirt sleeves appeared on the threshold.

"Hullo, Jones, that you? Come along!" he said genially.

"Bless me!" exclaimed Nare-Jones irritably, "there's not a light in any of the windows. It might be a house of the dead!"

Harland stared at him, but all he said was: "Have a whisky-and-soda?"

Savelsan, who was leaning over the billiard table, trying side-strokes with his back to Nare-Jones, added:

"Did you expect us to illuminate the place for you? There's not a soul in the house but ourselves."

"Say when," said Harland, poisoning the bottle over a glass.

Nare-Jones laid down what he held in his hand on the corner of the billiard table, and took up his glass.

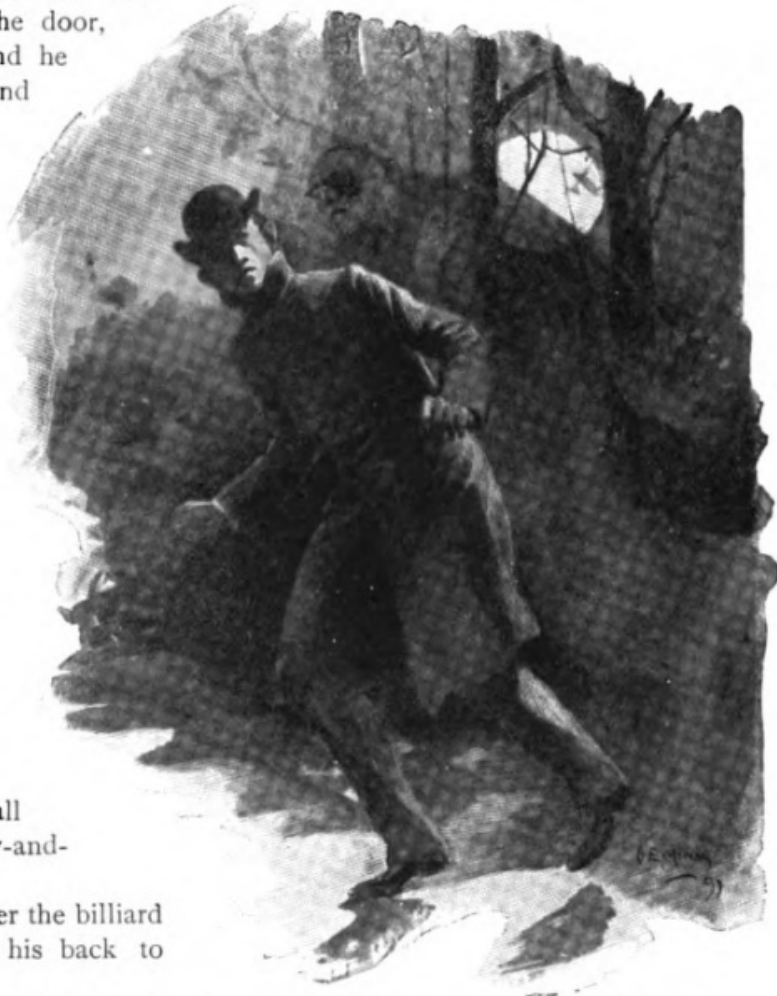
"What in creation's this?" asked Savelsan.

"I don't know; the wind blew it to my feet just outside," replied Nare-Jones, between two long pulls at the whisky-and-soda.

"*Blown* to your feet?" repeated Savelsan, taking up the thing and weighing it in his hand. "It must be blowing a hurricane then."

"It isn't blowing at all," returned Nare-Jones blankly. "The night is dead calm."

For the object that had fluttered and rolled so lightly across the turf and gravel was a small, battered, metal calf, made of some heavy brass amalgam.



He admits that he passed the end of the avenue at an amble.

Savelsan looked incredulously into Nare-Jones' face, and laughed.

"What's wrong with you? You look queer."

Nare-Jones laughed too; he was already ashamed of the last ten minutes.

Harland was meantime examining the metal calf.

"It's a Bengali idol," he said. "It's been knocked about a good bit, by Jove! You say it blew out of the shrubbery?"

"Like a bit of paper, I give you my word, though there was not a breath of wind going," admitted Nare-Jones.

"Seems odd, don't yer know?" remarked Harland carelessly. "Now you two fellows had better begin; I'll mark."

Nare-Jones happened to be in form that night, and Savelsan became absorbed in the delightful difficulty of giving him a sound thrashing.

Suddenly Savelsan paused in his stroke.

"What the sin's that?" he asked.

They stood listening. A thin, broken crying could be heard.

"Sounds like green plover," remarked Nare-Jones, chalking his cue.

"It's a kitten they've shut up somewhere," said Harland.

"That's a child, and in the deuce of a fright, too," said Savelsan. "You'd better go and tuck it up in its little bed, Harland," he added, with a laugh.

Harland opened the door. There could no longer be any doubt about the sounds; the stifled shrieks and thin whimpering told of a child in the extremity of pain or fear.

"It's upstairs," said Harland. "I'm going to see."

Nare-Jones picked up a lamp and followed him.

"I stay here," said Savelsan sitting down by the fire.

In the hall the two men stopped and listened again. It is hard to locate a noise, but this seemed to come from the upper landing.

"Poor little beggar!" exclaimed Harland, as he bounded up the staircase. The bedroom doors opening on the square central landing above were all locked, the keys being on the outside. But the crying led them into a side passage which ended in a single room.

"It's in here, and the door's locked," said Nare-Jones. "Call out and see who's there."

But Harland was set on business. He flung his weight against the panel, and the door burst open, the lock ricocheting noisily into a corner. As they passed in, the crying ceased abruptly.

Harland stood in the centre of the room, while Nare-Jones held up the light to look round.

"The dickens!" exclaimed Harland exhaustively.

The room was entirely empty.

Not so much as a cupboard broke the smooth surface of the walls, only the two

low windows and the door by which they had entered.

"This is the room above the billiard-room, isn't it?" said Nare-Jones at last.

"Yes. This is the only one I have not had furnished yet. I thought I might——"

He stopped short, for behind them burst out a peal of harsh, mocking laughter, that rang and echoed between the bare walls.

Both men swung round simultaneously, and both caught a glimpse of a tall, thin figure in black, rocking with laughter in the doorway, but when they turned it was gone. They dashed out into the passage and landing. No one was to be seen. The doors were locked as before, and the staircase and hall were vacant.

After making a prolonged search through every corner of the house, they went back to Savelsan in the billiard-room.

"What were you laughing about? What is it anyway?" began Savelsan at once.

"It's nothing. And we didn't laugh," replied Nare-Jones definitely.

"But I heard you," insisted Savelsan. "And where's the child?"

"I wish you'd go up and find it," returned Harland grimly. "We heard the laughing and saw, or thought we saw, a man in black——"

"Something like a priest in a cassock," put in Nare-Jones.

"Yes, like a priest," assented Harland, "but as we turned he disappeared."

Savelsan sat down and gazed from one to the other of his companions.

"The house behaves as if it was haunted," he remarked; "only there is no such thing as an authenticated ghost outside the experiences of the Psychical Research Society. I'd ask the Society down if I were you, Harland. You never can tell what you may find in these old houses."

"It's not an old house," replied Harland. "It was built somewhere about '40. I certainly saw that man; and, look to it, Savelsan, I'll find out who or what he is. That I swear! The English law makes no allowance for ghosts—nor will I."

"You'll have your hands full, or I'm mistaken," exclaimed Savelsan, grinning. "A ghost that laughs and cries in a breath, and

rolls battered idols about your front door, is not to be trifled with. The night is young yet—not much past eleven. I vote for a peg all round and then I'll finish off Jones."

Harland, sunk in a fit of sullen abstraction, sat on a settee, and watched them. On a sudden he said:

"It's turned beastly cold."

"There's a beastly smell, you mean," corrected Savelsan crossly, as he went round the table. He had made a break of forty and did not want to be interrupted. "The draught is from the window."

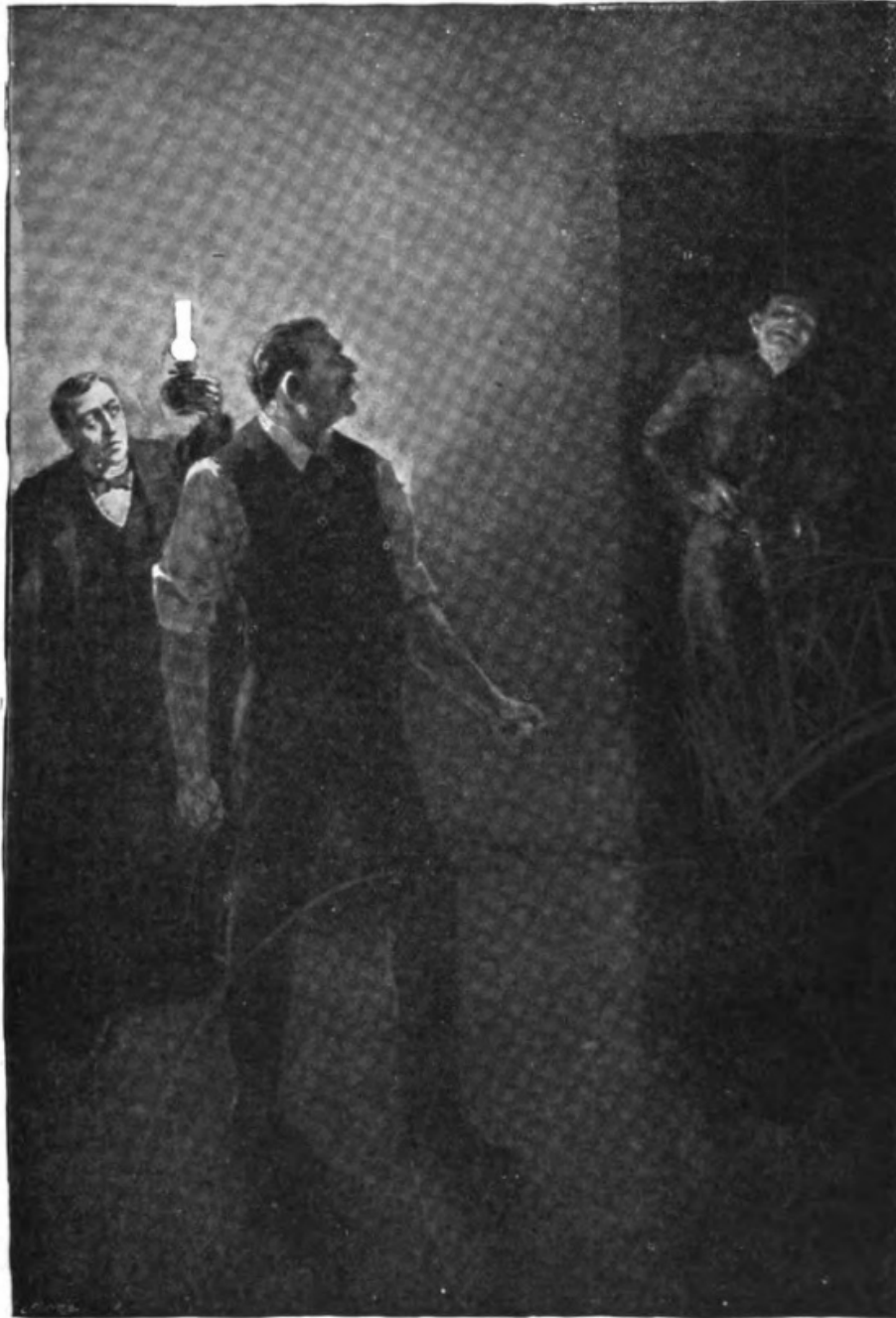
"I've not noticed it before this evening," said Harland, as he opened the shutters to make sure.

As he did so the night air rushed in heavy with the smell as of an old

well that has not been uncovered for years, a smell of slime and unwholesome wetness. The lower part of the window was wide open and Harland banged it down.

"It's abominable!" he said, with an angry sniff. "Enough to give us all typhoid."

"Only dead leaves," remarked Nare-Jones. "There are the rotten leaves of twenty winters under the trees and outside this window. I noticed them when we came over on Tuesday."



Both caught a glimpse of a tall, thin figure in black, rocking with laughter in the doorway.

"I'll have them cleared away to-morrow. I wonder how Thoms came to leave this window open," grumbled Harland, as he closed and bolted the shutter. "What do you say—forty-five?" and he went over to mark it up.

The game went on for some time, and Nare-Jones was lying across the table with the cue poised, when he heard a slight sound behind him. Looking round he saw Harland, his face flushed and angry, passing softly—



He snatched a billiard ball from the table and flung it with all his strength at the face

wonderfully softly for so big a man, Nare-Jones remembers thinking—along the angle of the wall towards the window.

All three men unite in declaring that they were watching the shutter, which opened inwards as if thrust by some furtive hand from outside. At the moment Nare-Jones and Savelsan were standing directly opposite to it on the further side of the table, while Harland crouched behind the shutter intent on giving the intruder a lesson.

As the shutter unfolded to its utmost the two men opposite saw a face pressed against the glass, a furrowed evil face, with a wide laugh perched upon its sinister features.

There was a second of absolute stillness, and Nare-Jones's eyes met those other eyes with the fascinated horror of a mutual understanding, as all the foul fancies that had pursued him in the avenue poured back into his mind.

With an uncontrollable impulse of resentment, he snatched a billiard ball from the table and flung it with all his strength at the face. The ball crashed through the glass

and through—the face beyond it! The glass fell shattered, but the face remained for an instant peering and grinning at the aperture, then as Harland sprang forward it was gone.

"The ball went clean through it!" said Savelsan with a gasp.

They crowded to the window, and throwing up the sash, leant out. The dank smell clung about the air, a boat-shaped moon glimmered between the bare branches, and on the white drive beyond the shrubbery the billiard ball could be seen a shining spot under the moon. Nothing more.

"What was it?" asked Harland.

"Only a face at the window," quoted Savelsan with an awkward attempt at making light of

his own scare. "Devilish queer face too, eh, Jones?"

"I wish I'd got him!" returned Harland frowning. "I'm not going to put up with any tricks about the place, don't yer know?"

"You'd bottle any tramp loafing round," said Nare-Jones.

Harland looked down at his immense arms outlined in his shirt-sleeves.

"I could that," he answered. "But this chap—did you hit him?"

"Clean through the face! or, at any rate, it looked like it," replied Savelsan, as Nare-Jones stood silent.

Harland shut the shutter and poked up the fire.

"It's a cursed creepy affair!" he said, "I hope the servants won't get hold of this nonsense. Ghosts play the very mischief with a house. Though I don't believe in them myself, don't yer know?" he concluded.

Then Savelsan broke out in an unexpected place.

"Nor do I—as a rule," he said slowly.

"Still you know it is a sickening idea to think of a spirit condemned to haunt the scene of its crime waiting for the world to die."

Harland and Nare-Jones looked at him.

"Have a whisky neat," suggested Harland soothingly. "I never knew you taken that way before."

Nare-Jones laughed out. He says he does not know why he laughed nor why he said what follows.

"It's this way," he said. "The moment of foul satisfaction is gone for ever, yet for all time the guilty spirit must perpetuate its sin—the sin that brought no lasting reward, only a momentary reward experienced, it may be, centuries ago, but to which still clings the punishment of eternally rehearsing in loneliness, and cold, and gloom, the sin of other days. No punishment can be conceived more horrible. Savelsan is right."

"I think we've had enough about ghosts," said Harland cheerfully, "let's go on. Hurry up, Savelsan."

"There's the billiard ball," said Nare-Jones. "Who'll go fetch?"

"Not I," replied Savelsan promptly.

"When that—was at the window, I felt sick."

Nare-Jones nodded. "And I wanted to bolt!" he said emphatically.

Harland faced about from the fire.

"And I, though I saw nothing but the shutter, I—hang it!—don't yer know—so did I! There was panic in the air for a minute.

But I'm shot if I'm afraid now," he concluded doggedly, "I'll go."

His heavy animal face was lit with courage and resolution.

"I've spent close upon five thousand pounds over this blessed house first and last, and I'm not going to be done out of it by any infernal spiritualism!" he added, as he took down his coat and pulled it on.

"It's all in view from the window except those few yards through the shrubbery," said Savelsan. "Take a stick and go. Though, on

second thoughts, I bet you a fiver you don't."

"I don't want a stick," answered Harland. "I'm not afraid—not now—and I'd meet most men with my hands."

Nare-Jones opened the shutters again; the sash was low, and he pushed the window up and leant far out.



Harland gave him a look that set his blood burning.

"It's not much of a drop," he said, and slung his legs out over the lintel; but the night was full of the smell, and something else. He leapt back into the room. "Don't go, Harland!"

Harland gave him a look that set his blood burning.

"What is there, after all, to be afraid of in a ghost?" he asked heavily.

Nare-Jones, sick with the sense of his own newly-born cowardice, yet entirely unable to master it, answered feebly:

"I can't say, but don't go."

The words seemed inevitable, though he could have kicked himself for hanging back.

There was a forced laugh from Savelsan.

"Give it up and stop at home, little man," he said.

Harland merely snorted in reply, and laid his great leg over the window ledge. The other two watched his big, tweed-clad figure as it crossed the grass and disappeared into the shrubbery.

"You and I are in a preposterous funk," said Savelsan, with unpleasant explicitness, as Harland, whistling loudly, passed into the shadow.

But this was a point on which Nare-Jones could not bring himself to speak at that moment. Then they sat on the sill and waited. The moon shone out clearly above the avenue, which now lay white and undimmed between its crowding trees.

"And he's whistling because he's afraid," continued Savelsan.

"He's not often afraid," replied Nare-Jones shortly; "beside, he's doing what neither of us were very keen on."

The whistling stopped suddenly. Savelsan

said afterwards that he fancied he saw Harland's huge, grey-clad shoulders, with uplifted arms, rise for a second above the bushes.

Then out of the silence came peal upon peal of that infernal laughter, and, following it, the thin, pitiful crying of the child. That too ceased, and an absolute stillness seemed to fall upon the place.

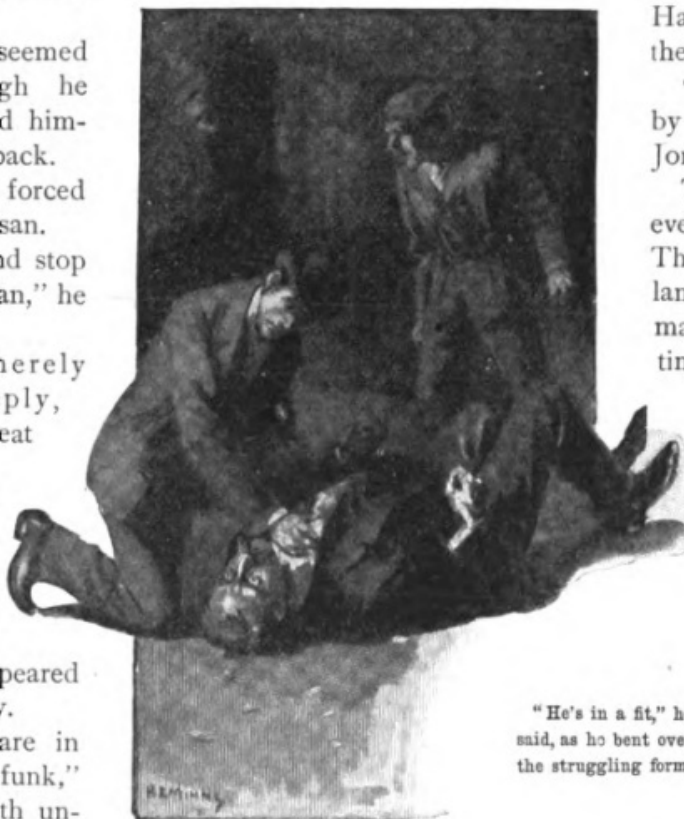
They leant out and listened intently. The minutes passed slowly. In the middle of the avenue the billiard ball glinted on the gravel, but there was no sign of Harland emerging from the shrubbery path.

"He should be there by now," said Nare-Jones anxiously.

They listened again; everything was quiet. The ticking of Harland's big watch on the mantelpiece was distinctly audible.

"This is too much," said Nare-Jones. "I'm going to see where he is."

He swung himself out on the grass, and Savelsan called to him to wait, as he was coming also. While Nare-Jones stood waiting,



"He's in a fit," he said, as he bent over the struggling form.

there was a sound as of a pig grunting and rooting among the dead leaves in the shrubbery.

They ran forward into the darkness, and found the shrubbery path. A minute later they came upon something that tossed and snorted and rolled under the shrubs.

"Great Heavens!" cried Nare-Jones, "it's Harland!"

"He's breaking somebody's neck," added Savelsan, peering into the gloom.

Nare-Jones was himself again. The powerful instinct of his profession—the help-giving instinct, possessed him to the exclusion of every other feeling.

"He's in a fit—just a fit," he said in matter of fact tones, as he bent over the struggling form, "that's all."

With the assistance of Savelsan, he managed to carry Harland out into the open drive. Harland's eyes were fearful, and froth hung about his blue puffing lips as they laid him down upon the ground. He rolled over, and lay still, while from the shadows broke another shout of laughter.

"It's apoplexy. We must get him away from here," said Nare-Jones. "But, first, I'm going to see what is in those bushes."

He dashed through the shrubbery, backwards and forwards. He seemed to feel the strength of ten men as he wrenched and tore and trampled the branches, letting in the light of the moon to its darkness. At last he paused, exhausted.

"Of course, there's nothing," said Savelsan wearily. "What did you expect after the incident of the billiard ball?"

Together, with awful toil, they bore the big man down the narrow avenue, and at the lodge gates they met the carriage.

Some time later the subject of their common experiences at Medhans Lea was discussed amongst the three men. Indeed, for many weeks Harland had not been in a state to discuss any subject at all, but as soon as he was allowed to do so, he invited Nare-Jones and Savelsan to meet Mr. Flaxman Low, the scientist, whose works on psychology and kindred matters are so well known, at the Métropole to thresh out the matter.

Flaxman Low listened with his usual air of gentle abstraction, from time to time making notes on the back of an envelope. He looked at each narrator in turn as he took up the thread of the story. He understood perfectly that the man who stood furthest from the mystery must inevitably have been the self-centred Savelsan; next in order came Nare-Jones, with sympathetic possibilities, but a crowded brain; closest of all would be big, kindly Harland, with more than one strong animal instinct about him, and whose bulk of matter was evidently permeated by a receptive spirit.

When they had ended, Savelsan turned to Flaxman Low.

"There you have the events, Mr. Low. Now, the question is how to deal with them."

"Classify them," replied Flaxman Low.

"The crying would seem to indicate a child," began Savelsan, ticking off the list on his fingers; "the black figure, the face at the window, and the laughter are naturally connected. So far I can go alone. I conclude that we saw the apparition of a man, possibly a priest, who had during his lifetime ill-treated a child, and whose punishment it is to haunt the scene of his crime."

"Precisely—the punishment being worked out under conditions which admit of human observation," returned Flaxman Low. "As for the child the sound of crying was merely part of the *mise-en-scène*. The child was not there."

"But that explanation stops short of several points. How about the suggestive thoughts experienced by my friend, Nare-Jones; what brought on the fit in the case of Mr. Harland, who assures us that he was not suffering from fright or other violent emotion; and what connection can be traced between all these things and the Bengali idol?" Savelsan ended.

"Let us take the Bengali idol first," said Low. "It is just one of those discrepant particulars which, at first sight, seem wholly irreconcilable with the rest of the phenomena, yet these often form a test point, by which our theories are proved or otherwise." Flaxman Low took up the metal calf from the table as he spoke. "I should be inclined to connect this with the child. Observe it. It has not been roughly used; it is rubbed and dented as a plaything usually is. I should say the child may have had Anglo-Indian relations."

At this, Nare-Jones bent forward, and in his turn examined the idol, while Savelsan smiled his thin, incredulous smile.

"These are ingenious theories," he said; "but we are really no nearer to facts, I am afraid."

"The only proof would be an inquiry into the former history of Medhans Lea; if events had happened there which would go to support this theory, why, then—— But I cannot supply that information since I never heard of Medhans Lea or the ghost until I entered this room."

"I know something of Medhans Lea," put in Nare-Jones. "I found out a good deal about it before I left the place. And I must congratulate Mr. Low on his methods, for his theory tallies in a wonderful manner with the facts of the case. The house was long known to be haunted. It seems that many years ago a lady, the widow of an Indian officer, lived there with her only child, a boy, for whom she engaged a tutor, a dark-looking man, who wore a long black coat like a cassock, and was called 'the Jesuit' by the country people.

"One evening the man took the boy out into the shrubbery. Screams were heard, and when the child was brought in he was found to have lost his reason. He

"Yes," admitted Savelsan grudgingly. "But how about your sensations and Harland's seizure? You must know what was done to the child, Harland—what did you see in the shrubbery?"

Harland's florid face assumed a queer pallor.

"I saw something," replied he hesitatingly, "but I can't recall what it was. I only remember being possessed by a blind terror, and then nothing more until I recovered consciousness at the hotel next day."

"Can you account for this, Mr. Low?" asked Nare-Jones, "and there was also my strange notion of the whispering in the avenue."

"I think so," replied Flaxman Low. "I believe that the theory of atmospheric influences, which includes the power of environment to reproduce certain scenes and also thoughts, would throw light upon your sensations as well as Mr. Harland's. Such influences play a far larger part in our everyday ex-



Flaxman Low took up the metal calf from the table as he spoke.

perience than we have as yet any idea of." There was a silence of a few moments; then Harland spoke:

"I fancy that we have said all that there is to be said upon the matter. We are much obliged to you, Mr. Low. I don't know how it strikes you other fellows, but, speaking for myself, I have seen enough of ghosts to last me for a very long time."

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